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COUNTRY Egypt

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1. Egypt's future agricultural prospects are dim. Although the delta area, which comprises at least half of the nation's six to six and one-half million acres, is one of the world's richest agricultural regions - with consistent triple-cropping - a number of past and present problems are combining to present apparently insoluble difficulties. These difficulties may be considered under the following headings: expansion of acreage, maintenance of present agricultural land and pressures of population.
2. As to expansion of acreage, it is estimated that perhaps as many as one and one-half million additional acres might be brought under cultivation in Egypt. However, little, if any, of this expansion could be accomplished by pushing out from the present borders of tilled land (generally, the broad delta lands between Cairo and the Rosetta and Damietta mouths of the Nile to the northeast and northwest, and the narrow river valley stretching south from Cairo some 400 miles to the Aswan dam). Instead, plans for new acreage envision elaborate irrigation projects in the now-desert land between Cairo and Alexandria and similar projects along the line of the great oases to the west. While it is evident that any expansion is desirable, it must also be considered that the maximum increase would be little more than 15 percent, that the cost of such expansion is nearly prohibitive and, finally, that the inflexible nature of Egypt's peasant mass is such as to make resettlement of farmers on such out-of-the-way lands nearly impossible. Egypt's present regime, admirable as it is for the uprooting of ancient vice and corruption, is military in its thinking and therefore believes that orders are to be obeyed; the Egyptian peasantry, however, fails to share this view. If the military planners attempt resettlement by fiat, there will be an inevitable collision with peasant stubbornness.

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3. This peasant inflexibility lies in part at the base of the second difficulty, adequate maintenance of present agricultural lands in the delta. Geologically, this zone is presumed to be a former shallow basin of the Mediterranean which has been silted-up by the Nile floods. Whatever its history, this soil is heavy with sodium and its increasing alkalinity is forcing potentially rich land out of production each year. Despite this, Egypt's "traditional" fertilizer is Chilean sodium nitrate, the use of which merely accentuates the problem. Yet the introduction of other fertilizers and parallel efforts to fight alkalinity are successfully resisted by the peasants, whose experience has taught them that Chilean fertilizer means green crops.

4. With regard to maintenance, the new regime's policy of land distribution (which is aimed at breaking up the large delta estates and limits individual land ownership to no more than 200 acres) must be criticized from the viewpoint of agricultural efficiency. The greater number of the large delta landholdings were "model farms" in the US sense: mechanized, efficient, well-maintained agricultural enterprises, often embracing 10 thousand acres. While no one can deny the political advantages in the Government's action to break up these holdings, there is nonetheless a "break-even" point, below which mechanization is no longer economically practical. [REDACTED] this "break-even" point would be roughly one thousand acres: certainly the present maximum of 200 acres is too small. Efficiency, and therefore production, will inevitably suffer.

5. The final difficulty - and one which makes the preceding ones fade in comparison - is Egypt's rapidly expanding population. The nation holds some 22 million people today, as compared with something around six million three generations ago. Yet Egypt's agricultural potential is best suited to support a population of no more than eight million. This phenomenally rapid expansion is usually attributed to medical advances, although today such public health indices as the incidence of trachoma and the percentage of blind in the population are shocking to a Westerner. Whatever the cause, the inevitable cure that comes to the Western mind - birth control - is apparently unthinkable for the Moslem. Yet the fact remains that achievement of the goals of agricultural expansion and increased production, even if possible, is merely a palliative when viewed in the light of a mounting population burden.

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